



Acceleration of Learning

Priority Standards in Missouri

Background

Acceleration of learning is the instructional practice of ensuring that students consistently receive grade-level materials, tasks, and assignments. It requires educator focus on moving forward rather than backward, using scaffolds to fill in only the most critical gaps - not in isolation, but at the moment they are needed within grade-level work. The use of priority standards can assist in this approach.

Consider the term *standards*, which has been used in multiple ways in education. In Missouri, the mid 1990s saw the emergence of the academic standards which were tied to the four [Performance Goals](#) and the [Show-Me Standards](#). These goals and standards are large -grain-size ideas that encompass many components.

This idea is important when contemplating what might be a priority standard. Larry Ainsworth and Doug Reeves are often credited with coining the phrase *power standards*, which later shifted to *priority standards*. Their research found that to be a priority standard, the standard must have endurance, leverage and essentiality. Meeting these conditions forces the standard to be one of great significance as well as overarching impact. Ainsworth and Reeves promoted a focus on standards identified as priority using these criteria, but not at the dismissal or lack of instruction on the other elements of a grade's curriculum.



Priority Standards

Endurance: Standards that focus on knowledge and skills that will be relevant throughout a student's lifetime.

Leverage: Standards that focus on knowledge and skills used in multiple academic disciplines.

Essentiality: Standards that focus on the knowledge and skills necessary for students to succeed in the next grade level or the next sequential course in an academic subject.

Larry Ainsworth, 2003

Defining Priority Standards

Missouri's current list of academic expectations is called the Missouri Learning Standards: Grade- and Course-Level Expectations and referred to as the MLS. While each of these expectations is important, they are the discrete elements linked back to a bigger overarching concept.

Priority standards should be selected from bigger concepts based on the requisite qualities of endurance, leverage and essentiality. While individual MLS expectations are vital components and should be part of instruction, many do not encompass enough content to be called a priority standard. By focusing more attention to investigations and studies targeting the larger priority ideas, teachers and students will be able to connect the content in the individual MLS expectations within the construct of the big idea.

The examples below illustrate potential priority standards in English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. They reflect some of the big ideas in our current MLS documents.

Develop and demonstrate comprehension reading skills in fiction and nonfiction.

Students ask questions and define problems to make sense of phenomena and solve problems.

Locate and analyze valid resources, formulate and support arguments with accurate evidence.

Numeracy describes how students should operate on quantities rather than operate on symbols.

Consider the power in identifying priority content in this manner: Districts could extend the strategy and select an overarching priority such as Interpreting and Analyzing Data/Texts. As this not only crosses multiple grade levels and content areas, it represents an example of endurance. Its leverage is how it connects to multiple grades and contents, so students would have opportunities to connect and reinforce learning in multiple ways.

Priority standards are useful for providing focus and common understanding of essential content at each grade level and how that content should progress from grade to grade. They can serve as a foundation for a coherent curriculum based on standards-aligned, grade-appropriate materials matched to student learning needs.

Using Priority Standards

Prioritizing certain standards over others does not mean eliminating the remainder of the MLS. All expectations should be taught and assessed, and re-taught and re-assessed, to gain evidence of student progress on learning outcomes.

The expectations that support, connect to, or enhance the priority standards are taught within the context of the priority standards but do not receive the same degree of instruction and assessment emphasis. These supporting expectations often become the instructional scaffolds that help students understand and attain the more comprehensive priority standards.

See the table below for examples of what priority standards should look like in practice.

District use of priority standards should look...	
<i>less like...</i>	<i>more like...</i>
an assessment document. <ul style="list-style-type: none">● targeting all MLS expectations as classroom priorities● focusing on coverage including prior year material● limiting priorities to areas of low performance on last year's state test	an instructional tool to accelerate learning. <ul style="list-style-type: none">● providing time for collaboration among teachers to identify the big ideas that have endurance, leverage and essentiality● supporting teachers as they identify the priorities● choosing a small number of priorities in each content area
teacher-centered instruction. <ul style="list-style-type: none">● expecting all students bring the same level of skill and knowledge to the lesson● including units from prior grades in this year's scope and sequence● treating each topic as equally essential	purposeful teacher-student interactions. <ul style="list-style-type: none">● providing opportunities for students to investigate the big ideas throughout the year● targeting instruction around the big ideas● Supporting student connection and use of the big ideas● Identifying areas where students may need some just-in-time support or mini-lessons to access grade-level instruction

DESE's Task Force for Learning Acceleration created [resources](#) to support the use of priority standards at the local level. Contact curriculum@dese.mo.gov with questions about priority standards.